CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURAL CRITICISM.

It has become an established opinion with writers of the day, that there is but one field which the human intellect leaves uncultivated. That this *dictum* has been applied to architecture, not without reason, we are not quite prepared to deny, but rather to assert, as we have already done, that the present state of architecture is a reproach to the age, and matter for deep regret to its professors. But when it is also put forth as an axiom, in the common criticism of newspapers, that architecture has no reproductive power,—that here is an art which will admit of no alteration, much less improvement, to which the ordinary revivifying influence of new matter is denied,—then we deem it necessary, however little so extreme an opinion may have taken hold of those who have really studied the art and the history of architecture, to protest against the frequent publication of erroneous views, with the sanction which the world at large will generally allow to what is confidently stated in print.—Probably, in no profession are the merits of a production more freely canvassed than in that of architecture; whilst seldom can we find professors so indifferent to the expression of their opinions in the form of publication. Were architectural criticism, generally, in the hands of architects, such writers would estimate conflicting views, and consider the merits of a work ere they would condemn it; with the pen, they would pause to examine what the ready tongue is too prone to say, often with little consideration for propriety of phrase. Instead of a mere repetition of crude or exploded notions, gleaned by the gentlemen who "do the fine arts," from encyclopædias and periodicals, real principles would be ascertained, and enunciated, and the people would have laid before them correct views in art, for those now substituted. Popular opinions upon architecture seem to us matter for the serious attention of architects; influencing, as they do, through the channels we have alluded to, the opinions of the educated, and often supplanting the result of mature reflection in the minds of architects themselves.

A careful examination into the actual state of architecture, considered as a reproductive art, compared with those other arts and sciences which occupy the attention of the world, would, we think, show,—first, a too highly rated estimate of the present exercise of invention in general, and, secondly, a misconception of the position of architecture in the present day, as compared with its state at former epochs. Now we might succeed in proving, that invention, strictly speaking, has never had any existence since the time of the creation. The most happy efforts of ingenuity, called inventions, have never been anything more than the re-arrangement of matter, or knowledge, previously existing; and discoveries in nature and science, which are not originative, are merely existing facts, made patent, through a careful balance of accompanying circumstances and causes.—It will be recollected, that we are only contending against popular fallacies; there may be some who know better.

But, by those who most of all lament the present state of architecture, a position is expected for it, in which *it* has never been placed, and which has never attached to any science, or to any other branch of art. By these writers it is assumed that architecture—which, let it also be recollected, deals with forms which can strongly impress themselves upon the recollection—should in all its works employ outlines and details, which had not before been met with—forgetting that such would be an exercise of invention, to which humanity is not equal.

By some of these critics it is supposed that the whole matter of architectural design is fully expressed in previously existing styles, and that the merits of any composition under notice, are to be estimated solely by its likeness to the architecture of a former period; whilst the stereotyped phrases of "slavish adherence to precedent," "want of originality," and the like, are used by others, who are unable to judge of the propriety of such condemnation. Were these writers architects, or had they examined the past history of art, they would know, that not architecture only, but every other department of art, has had slow progress; that in changes of style, and in what passes for originality of design, little, comparatively, is due to individuals; and that, in any particular era, had only one inventive mind been exercised, future ages would have found it hard to separate the modifications introduced, from the general style of the date. It is true that architects, and other professors of art, are often able, as in the architecture of Italy during "the revival," to distinguish the style of each master, and to ascribe, where due, the authorship of an invention. But the very circumstance, that the world in general is unable to do this, shews that the stages by which alterations in design are made, are too minute to constitute what the vulgar deem originality, and freedom from the "shackles of precedent." It does not follow because, for example, the capital and order from the Temple of Jupiter Stator are used in a modern building, that the whole design is not as creditable to its architect, and as fine in conception as any building by Palladio, or Vignola, or by an architect of any other period equally lamented as superior to this. In truth, the painter and the sculptor, as well as the architect, if they would produce works which may really be creditable to themselves and to the age, must draw largely for materials and ideas upon the works of predecessors, and because they do this, it does not follow that they render themselves less worthy of the admiration of their contemporaries, or less entitled to their place in the Walhalla of artistic fame. There may be many who repeat, rather than re-combine, and in whose works it is impossible to find the expression of an idea, the origin of which is not at once discernable; but it is our complaint, that ordinary critics do not separate these from the really intellectual and refined, and deny therefore the reproductive power of architecture, or suggest impossible theories for its renovation. What may be called originality in design has really the claim, only because the source of the idea is not, or at least not readily, apparent; for it is the ingenuity in seeking out unexamined and secret sources of ideas, rather than the originating of the ideas themselves, which makes the true artist.

We believe, that amongst the world, it is much easier to recollect the general character of a building, or the design of a capital, or other detail, than the treatment of the composition in a painting or a statue. Consequently the debt which is due to precedent in two of the arts, escapes the eye, whilst it is apparent in architecture; and as those who ordinarily write upon art, know little of its history and principles, it is assumed that architecture is in a position to which it has never before fallen, which is unparalleled in any other branch, and from which it can never recover. Now, indeed, we find, the more we examine into the past history as compared with the present state of art, that there is not quite that reason to doubt the occurrence of a future brilliant era, which many writers would have us suppose. We look back to the age of Grecian art, and find the style then proceeding by stages, scarcely discoverable by the eye, even of an artist; in the early Roman period, and in the Revival, we find a respect for "precedent" which may not unfairly be compared to that, for which we are said to be remarkable; and during the same age of "the revival" we find the Italian and the Gothic styles co-existent, and even practised by the same architects, which is the chief stigma upon architecture now. Even in Gothic architecture, we doubt whether the changes of style appeared as great and important whilst in progress, as they do to us, or whether posterity will not see in our efforts something of general progress, which they will be able to comprehend and classify, somewhat as we are able to do similar periods of co-existant styles, which the history of art, if at all minutely examined, discloses.—That the monuments of art of all ages and styles, can be made to minister to invention and good architecture, we should not find it necessary to state, were not the contrary asserted, in effect, in the writings of critics of the order we have referred to. Such writers, in their hostility to copyism, would deny us even the legitimate and proper use of ancient models, forgetting that even "precedent" may have its value, and, further, afford that which one mind alone could not by nature supply.

There is yet one circumstance in the present state of architecture, which is not wholly without cause for congratulation, and yet may have some immediate effects. It cannot be denied, that the very advantages which architecture has, through the accurate manner in which it is illustrated, are not applied in the way most conducive to excellence in style. But, were it asserted, that in this there could be any thing opposed to the interests of the art, it would in effect be to deny the value of ancient models, which, it is our object to urge, contain the chief matter out of which future excellence in style must be created. Architecture has within it a reproductive power, which can parallel the style of any age; but that power is impeded, whilst the ordinary channels of criticism are made to disseminate views, not founded upon a deep insight into a subject of much difficulty, one which can only be grappled with by those who are perfectly familiar with every branch of the inquiry.

MURAL DECORATIONS: ST. GERMAIN L'AUXERROIS, PARIS.

For four years M. Mottez, a French artist, has been engaged in the decoration of the porch of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, an addition to the main building attributed to the middle of the fifteenth century. He has now finished his work, and produced a series of pictures in fresco, illustrative of the establishment of the Christian religion, conceived in the Gothic spirit, and made to accord in character with the church.

The principal picture is in the tympanum of the great doorway, and represents the Saviour on the cross, supported on the knees of the Father, who sits behind the head of it. Around, at his feet, are clustered the persons who have thrown lustre on the church of France,—all saints but one, and that is Joan of Arc! On the right and left of this are two long upright pictures, with pointed heads, filled with super-posed groups. One, Christ preaching on the mountain, with groups of figures below, illustrating certain commandments; and the other our Saviour on the Mount of Olives, with the Virgin Mary, surrounded by a group of women, at the foot.

Some of the French journals object to the external decoration of a Gothic building with painting; and, secondly, to a return to a style of art long since abrogated.

One of these, *L'Illustration*, offers many objections to such works, and to that now under consideration in particular. "If we candidly examine," says that journal, "this specimen of monumental ornament, the return to polychromatic architecture which has been attempted in the porch of the church of St. Germain l'Auxerrois, leaving out of consideration the work of the painter, of which we will not yet speak, we must frankly own our opinion, that these works which have received so much praise, are neither correct, useful, nor agreeable. Are they legitimate—do they belong to the art of the middle age? is a question that qualified archæologists must decide. They found, under the white-wash, traces of painting at the cathedral of Saint Denis, also at the Sainte-Chapelle of Paris, upon a bas-relief on the outside wall of the choir of Notre Dame, in the cathedrals of Rheims, Chartres, Soissons, &c., but these remains of painting are mostly seen in the interior, and we should, perhaps, commend a zeal which has there restored these works to general favour. There these fanciful ornaments, of a thousand colours, blend well with the play of light produced by the stained glass; and their rich details form in the chapels a natural transition to the rich decorations of the altars." But outside, continues the writer, it is another matter, and he gives reasons for objecting to it. "No architect of taste," he goes on to say, "would think of making a vestibule as costly as a reception-room; and then what place have they chosen for this architectural miniature? We would accept it in some dark place away from the city. But here, in front of the largest and the most beautiful monument in Paris,—in front of the noble architecture of the colonnade of the Louvre, the folly of the toy is made more apparent by contrast. Moreover, is it a wise thing that these works should be under an open portico, open in every direction to the west wind, that is to say, to the rainy quarter which rules in our Parisian climate three parts of the year. When one sees the damps which, in the interior of the church, have greatly spoilt

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